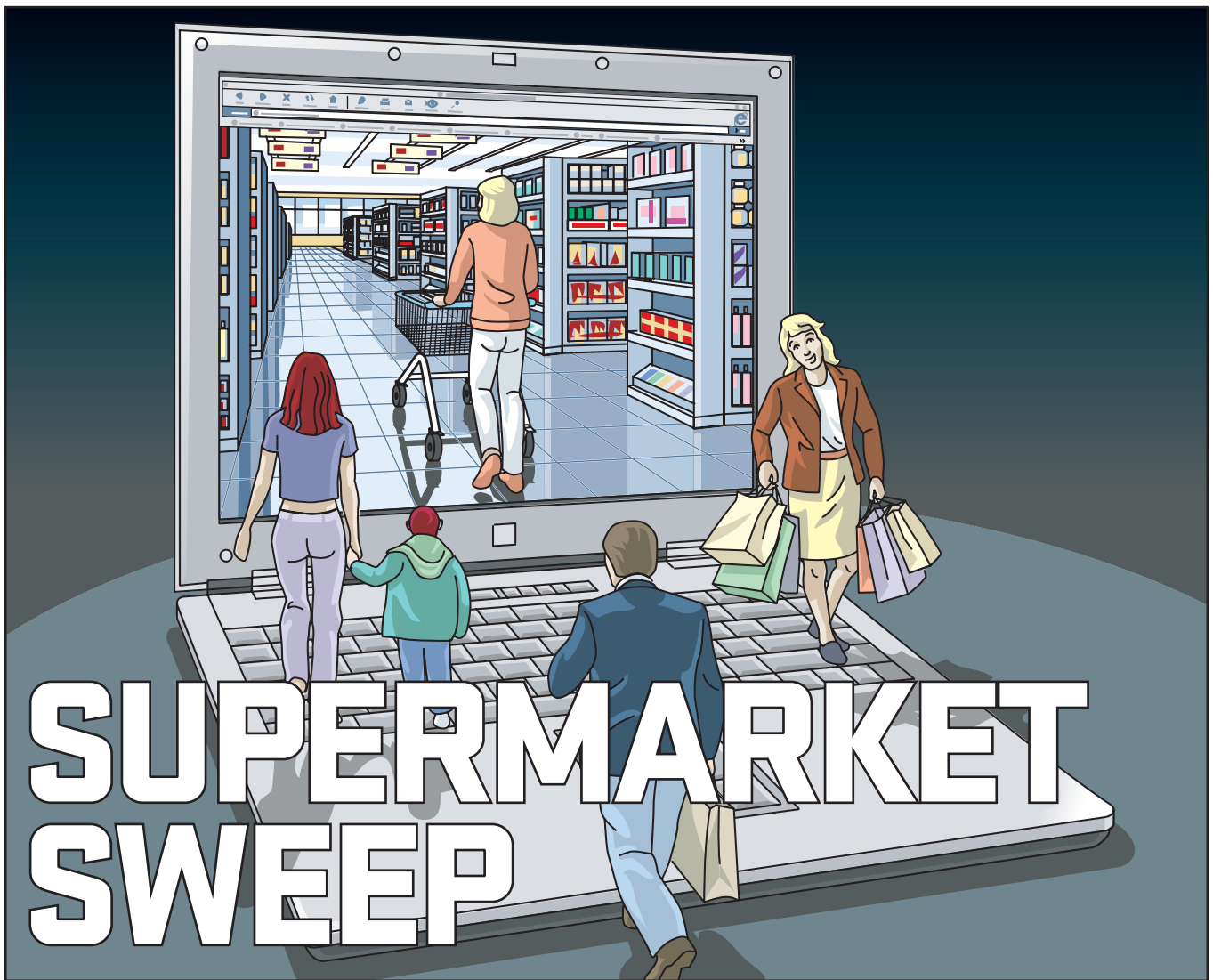




Find shopping a chore? Buy your groceries online and you'll never again have to grapple with humanity over that last loaf or tin of corned beef. **Peter Wood** puts the four biggest UK online supermarkets to the test

Anyone who has experienced the unpleasantness of crowded aisles and checkouts knows how frustrating supermarkets can be. And once you've finally made your purchases, you're faced with the prospect of getting everything home. If you drive, you waste time in traffic and have to tussle for a parking space; if not, you're faced with a long walk home, your fingers turning blue from the handles of those plastic bags. But there is an alternative. Asda, Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose run online supermarkets offering the same range of products as your local store.

Supermarket websites used to be slow and difficult to use. People often complained it took longer to shop online than it did to visit a store, even if they were lucky enough to have a broadband connection. There were also numerous complaints about the quality of the fresh produce sent out. But major stores have had time to develop their sites and learn from their mistakes, so we thought it was time to pay them a visit and see what it's like to do your grocery shopping online.

We did a blind buying test on all four supermarket websites, so none of the shops knew they were being tested. We spent £25

at each site and bought the same items from each store. We didn't conduct enough tests to make definitive price comparisons or judge value for money. But as you can see in the table on page 138, some supermarkets charge more for home delivery than others. We also looked for a well-designed site that was easy to use and well organised with good customer service, punctuality and a good returns process.

PLACING YOUR ORDER

A good supermarket website, like any good website, should be clear, well laid out and easy to use. We examined each of the four sites for ease of use. All four did well. However, there were disparities between the sites when it came to registering and explaining how the process works. We found Sainsbury's made registration a lot more difficult than it needs to be. All the sites require you to create a password of some kind when you register and Asda requires a PIN.

Site navigation is an important consideration, since shopping online could become stressful if you can't find what you're looking for easily. The different departments within the store should be well organised and clearly labelled so you can find what you want

without lots of hunting. A good search function is a must, so you can find specific items without browsing. We examined all these aspects and found the stores varied considerably.

We would expect offers and promotions to be as prominently displayed as they would in a local supermarket. After all, you should be able to save money just as easily online as if you physically visited the store. The best sites sort their special offers by category, such as two-for-one offers and money-off deals, and by product type. This allows you to hone in quickly on any product types you might have been looking for. We have noted in the reviews where stores are particularly strong in these areas.

Online shopping does not always give you the opportunity to check the labels on products. If you're actually holding an item in your hand, you can see at a glance what its ingredients are and its nutritional value. However, some online stores list these details for each product. Keeping an eye on what you are putting in your basket should be just as easy online as it is while in the store. We'd expect a clearly presented list, with the latest item prominently displayed, along with VAT and delivery costs, so spending can be monitored easily.



250g lean mince
 1x large Hovis Country Granary loaf
 500g Oaten Biscuits
 1kg bananas
 Six eggs
 550ml Newcastle Brown Ale
 2pt semi-skimmed milk
 500g Kellogg's Saltana Bran
 400g Melvilles Milk Chocolate Digestives
 12x King Wilkies (jelly)
 2x 60w bayonet light bulbs
 3x kiwi fruit
 1x Lettuce
 1x cucumber
 170g Pavo
 250g Ryvita Multigrain
 400g broccoli
 1x jar pickled onions
 300g Jacobs Crackers
 250g Marmite
 100g salad bag
 500g grapes



◀ We took care to order a selection of soft, breakable, perishable and hard items that could get damaged if the shopping was handled roughly. Where possible we ordered the same brand, and in the case of generic products such as fruit or vegetables we got the same quantities from each shop. To compare how much the same list of items cost from each store, excluding delivery, see our table on page 138

The contact details for the site's customer support department should be clearly labelled and visible, so it's easy to get in touch immediately if anything goes wrong with your order. Unfortunately, not all the sites managed to get this right. Some of the sites we reviewed had been designed with too much emphasis on their appearance, which meant that contact details and other important information were hard to find.

FILLING YOUR ORDER

None of the supermarkets would give us precise details of the technology behind their website. There's a reason for this. The software a supermarket uses has often been specifically written for it. Revealing any details about that software could help the supermarket's competitors, and might also help someone who wanted to compromise the security of the supermarket's website. However, we can give you an idea of what happens to your order after you submit it.

The database processes the order and, in three cases out of four, checks your postcode and sends the order to the local branch of the supermarket you've chosen. Ocado doesn't have high street branches; instead, it distributes Waitrose products from three central warehouses in London, Manchester and Birmingham. Once the order has been passed to the correct location, a 'picker' downloads it to a handheld computer. The picker works his or her way around the store or warehouse, collecting the items in your order.

According to the Tesco press office, its pickers are instructed to shop as if they were shopping for themselves, looking for the freshest, best-value product from any shelf. As far as we could tell, this seemed to hold true for all the supermarkets: we ordered a number of perishable items and all were fresh. Fresh meat tended to have about two days left before the sell-by date. We checked several stores in our local area and the average there seemed to be three days. It's not a big enough difference to give great cause for concern, but we recommend

you double-check the sell-by date on any meat you order before you accept it.

Once the pickers have collected all the items on your list, the shopping is put in bags with items grouped according to the supermarket's packaging guidelines. Some supermarkets may put fresh meat in a bag of its own, while others may pack all your breakable items (eggs, biscuits and so on) in one bag. The bags are then transferred to a van and delivered to your home.

ON DELIVERY

When your order arrives, you should check your bill and all the goods you bought before you accept them, or at least before you open them. In 2004, the Office of Fair Trading launched an investigation into online supermarkets following a number of customer complaints. The supermarkets had allegedly sent customers goods at the end of their shelf-life and charged customers higher prices than they would have paid in store. Customers also complained that sites didn't warn them when an item was not in stock, instead substituting a similar item for the one that was unavailable. In addition, there were claims that packers had mishandled goods, bruising fruit and damaging fragile items.

Some of these grievances may have been legitimate, but others arose from unrealistic expectations. Take the failure to notify customers that an item was out of stock. With the exception of Ocado, none of the supermarkets sends out goods from a central warehouse; they simply forward your order to the store nearest you. Given how quickly goods can sell, it's not reasonable to expect a website to track minute-by-minute the exact stock levels in hundreds of shops; one supermarket may carry up to 50,000 product lines.

That doesn't mean the shop should feel free to ignore your order and send whatever it sees fit. We checked with all four supermarkets, and while they will offer a substitute for a product that's unavailable, the driver of the delivery van should inform you of the substitution and give you the chance to refuse it before you take formal receipt of your order. In our test, we

were offered one substitution: a 125g jar of Marmite instead of a 250g jar. Ocado's driver told us of the substitution and ensured we were happy with it before asking for our signature.

Prices on your final bill may not be the same as those displayed when you made your order. This happens because prices may have changed between the time you made your order and the day of delivery. Make sure you check your bill carefully and if you feel there is an unacceptable discrepancy, notify the supermarket immediately by calling its helpline.

RETURNS POLICY

You should expect a flexible returns policy. Ideally, you should check your shopping when it arrives, but this may not be possible. You might be out or indisposed, obliging someone else to take receipt for you. Your shop should have a procedure for returns and refunds made after the driver has left. We were not disappointed. We were offered a refund in every case and were usually told to keep the unsatisfactory goods too. In one case, we were offered a refund of twice the original cost of the item.

Bargain hunter

Your best-value store

Would you like to know which of the shops tested would work out cheapest for your weekly shop? If you use www.mysupermarket.co.uk, you can shop at all four supermarkets simultaneously. When you choose an item, the site shows you how much that item costs in each of the four shops. When it comes time to pay, you're shown the total cost of your shop from all four websites, assuming they all stock the items you've chosen. Simply choose the shop that offers the best deal and proceed to the checkout. The site is currently free, although you may have to pay for some services in future.



ASDA



www.asda.co.uk
Delivery charge: £3.99
Minimum order: £25
Our grocery bill: £24.69

Registration on the Asda site is simple and takes around five minutes. Instead of a password, you're asked to choose a numerical PIN for security and authentication. This is the least attractive of the four sites on test. The homepage isn't too bad, though the scrolling advert at the top of the screen is distracting and tacky. Click through to the grocery shopping site, however, and everything looks as if it was designed by a keen amateur. It sounds awful, but actually it isn't; we really liked this website.

The link from the main page to the grocery section is large and prominently displayed at the top of the page. The grocery page itself looks primitive, but all the main product categories are clearly listed down the left of the page so you can't miss them. Browsing products is easy, and there are always links to take you back one stage in the hierarchy or to the main product category list, so it's impossible to get lost.

Asda offers the same multi-search tool as Ocado. You can also create standard shopping lists. This is handy if you order the same kinds of products at regular intervals; you

can make a cleaning products shopping list or a baby stuff shopping list, for example. There's an area of the site devoted to special offers and the offers are split by category such as roll-back, multi-save and Asda price. The site doesn't make it clear what a roll-back is, but after a considerable hunt around, we found it's a price reduction.

The 'contact us' link is prominently displayed in large, bold letters. Managing the shopping basket was easy, though the buttons for adding and removing items were rather small, and the last item ordered is displayed at the bottom of the list. Other sites have much better-designed baskets, with large chunky buttons, and they display the last item in bold at the top of the list.

The search function could be improved, too. It got confused if we added weight to the search criteria (for instance, 400g broccoli rather than just broccoli), telling us that a product wasn't in stock when we knew it was. Each product displayed on the website has its own information button, but



▲ The Asda website allows you to create custom shopping lists, tailored to any occasion or need. Here we're working on our Christmas shopping list

the range of information shown was sparse compared to that provided by both Sainsbury's and Ocado.

All our goods arrived on time and intact. We were pleased to see that fragile items such as light bulbs were packed in their own bag, which had been clearly labelled with a large Fragile sticker. We were impressed with the refund policy. We called Asda customer service and complained that our grapes weren't ripe. The staff happily arranged for a refund. Because the grapes were Asda branded, we would have been refunded twice what they cost to buy.

There are a few things about Asda's website that could be improved. However, it works well and proves that a website doesn't need to look good to be well designed.

SUMMARY

- ☒ Careful packing of breakables
- ☒ Excellent returns policy
- ☒ Not enough product information

OCADO (WAITROSE)



www.ocado.co.uk
Delivery charge: £5
Minimum order: £40
Our grocery bill: £28.21

Registering with Ocado was quick and simple, taking just over three minutes. The website is clear. It doesn't attempt to compete with the exotic product ranges of Tesco and Sainsbury's, which offer everything from DVD players to home insurance. Instead, it confines itself to selling groceries. Products are organised into four basic categories: food and drink, toiletries and baby, house and pets, and offers and ideas. At the time of this test, there was also an extra section for Christmas-related products.

Each section has its own tab within the webpage. On a tab, products are further divided by subcategory in a menu down the left-hand side. This logical, simple structure makes searching easy. However, we prefer the 'tree' structure of sites such as Asda, in which all product categories are displayed down the left-hand side of the page, an organisational scheme that makes browsing quicker.

Along with its normal product search function, Ocado also has a useful multi-search function. Enter the names of all the products you're looking for, separated by commas, into multi-search and the results are

displayed as a set of sequentially linked pages. We tried this function with several combinations of different products and it worked well each time. The site is easy to use, though the link that takes you to the contact details is right at the bottom of the page in a very small font. Each product entry was accompanied by lots of useful information, including nutritional details for food items.

Ocado has the highest minimum order amount in our round-up, at £40. As we only wanted to do a £25 shop, this was inconvenient. Ocado also had the fewest delivery slots available on the day we wanted our shopping to arrive. In the end, we had to book delivery for between 10 and 11pm. The delivery arrived shortly after 10 o'clock. The driver was polite and helpful, waited patiently while we checked all our shopping and made sure we were happy with a substitution. Our shopping had been thoughtfully packed. Items such as pickled onions, light bulbs and milk,



▲ Ocado's site is good-looking and simple. Product categories are organised into tabs and it's easy to find what you want

which might break, leak or interfere with other items, had been packed separately. Like Asda, Ocado took particular care of fragile items. All the breakable items we ordered had been packed in one bag. None of the items had been broken or damaged and, with the exception of the substitution to which we had already agreed, all the products ordered were present and correct.

Ocado offered a good service aside from the difficulty in getting a delivery slot. The range of products was more limited than those offered by competitors and products tended to be more expensive than equivalents from competitor sites, but the website looked good and worked well. However, for it to be really easy to use, elements such as contact details need to be given greater prominence.

SUMMARY

- ☒ Careful packing of breakables
- ☒ Difficulty getting a delivery slot
- ☒ Highest minimum spend



SAINSBURY'S



www.sainsburys.co.uk

Delivery charge: **£5**

Minimum order: **£25**

Our grocery bill: **£25.28**

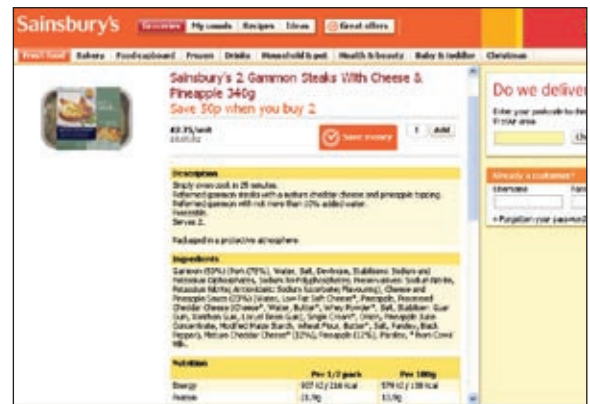
You can get to Sainsbury's grocery shopping website from www.sainsburys.co.uk or www.sainsburystoyou.com. The first website offers a broad range of goods and services, including household items and financial services. You can even choose to use Sainsbury's as your gas and electricity supplier. The second site concentrates solely on grocery and household shopping.

Like www.ocado.co.uk, the site is pleasing to the eye. There was, however, no obvious way of registering, even when we clicked on the Shopping and Services link. On the next page we clicked on the first relevant link we saw, entitled 'Buy groceries online and order wine by the case'. This took us through to another page on which there was a link entitled 'Shop for groceries online'. We started to wonder if we would ever get to the shop itself, but in the middle of the next page was a 'Start shopping' button.

Hoping we'd be given a chance to register once we'd shopped and proceeded to the checkout, we clicked the button. This was a mistake. Had we looked in the top right-hand corner of this last page we'd have seen the

word 'register' in small letters. As it was, we were offered the chance to register at the checkout. But we discovered this only after our browser had crashed, emptying our shopping basket and forcing us to start shopping from scratch. If we'd been registered, the site would have remembered the basket's contents. We later discovered that www.sainsburystoyou.com would have taken us directly to the site with the registration link (in tiny letters, hidden away in the top-most corner of the page). Having two web addresses is confusing and unnecessary, particularly when the one that uninitiated users will type into their browser doesn't give them immediate access to the service they are most likely to want, which is online grocery shopping.

The site also needs to be redesigned to make vital features more immediately obvious, such as the 'contact us' link, even if this makes it less visually sophisticated. We were, however, impressed with the amount of information given about each product, particularly nutritional information for



▲ Sainsbury's website has highly detailed information for each product on sale. Just double-click on the product name

food. There is no excuse for making an uninformed purchase from this website.

All our shopping arrived intact and on time. As with Ocado the shopping was well packed. The eggs were in their own bag and all the soft perishable items were packed together, well away from hard glass or metal items. The driver was polite and waited patiently while we checked all the bags before signing the receipt. Staff at the call centre were polite and helpful.

The returns process, however, was disappointing. We called customer support and explained that we wanted a refund for some unripe grapes. We were offered an e-voucher to spend at Sainsbury's instantly, or a cash refund to our debit card in up to seven working days. Tesco was able to refund cash within a matter of minutes, so why couldn't Sainsbury's?

SUMMARY

- ✓ Lots of information about products
- ✗ Difficult to find registration page
- ✗ Refunds slower than other stores

TESCO



www.tesco.com

Delivery charge: **£3.99**

Minimum order: **None**

Our grocery bill: **£24.63**

According to a survey carried out last year by ICM market research (www.icmresearch.co.uk), 48 per cent of people think Tesco is too big and powerful and needs to be cut down to size. If you're one of those people, I'm afraid we're going to disappoint you; Tesco's website was easily the best in this round-up.

Tesco.com steers a middle course between Asda's chunky and cheerful design ethos and the more refined appearance of the Sainsbury's and Ocado websites. The front page doesn't look that appealing, but it's not ugly and offers a simple pictorial guide to all the services. The 'contact us' link is prominently displayed. The site also has an RSS feed, which informs you of new offers as they become available. This is a genuinely helpful use of new technology and Tesco is the only site we visited to think of it. Once you click through to the grocery shop, you're immediately taken to the registration page. Registration is simple and quick, taking only around three minutes.

Like Asda and Sainsbury's, Tesco offers a whole range of goods and services from one website, from DVD players to furniture. The grocery store

is organised by departments, but provides you with quick access to the latest offers, frequently purchased items and favourites. Offers are organised according to type, such as buy-one-get-one-free, multi-buy and so on, as well as by product type, such as wine and spirits and household products. It's easy to see if there's something for you.

The shopping basket is easy to use and displays the last item purchased in red at the top of your shopping list. One thing we did find disappointing was the small amount of information provided about individual products, such as use-by dates and nutritional information. There was often not enough to make an informed buying decision, especially where fresh products such as meat and fish were concerned.

The delivery arrived when expected and the driver waited patiently while we checked every bag. We returned the grapes to the driver with no explanation beyond "That doesn't look good" (in fact, they looked fine). No objection was raised



▲ The special offers on Tesco's website are easily browsable and explained in detail, so you shouldn't miss them

and the money was subsequently credited to our card. Once the driver had gone, we called customer support and explained to the lady on the phone that we'd forgotten to check the shopping and had subsequently discovered that our 55p-worth of broccoli was 'yellow' (it wasn't) to see how we'd get a refund. She sounded interested and genuinely sorry. In a real case, the money for the broccoli would have been refunded as early as that evening.

Tesco's site doesn't look as nice as Sainsbury's or Ocado's, though it is slicker than Asda's site. Still, it's easy to use, works well and lets you find your way around quickly. Tesco offers a wide range of products and services, deliveries can cost as little as £4, and help is easy to find. All in all, we were very impressed.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Easy to use
- ✓ Excellent returns policy
- ✗ Not enough product information



Healthy options Buying organic produce online

Supermarkets aren't the only businesses selling groceries online. In response to growing disenchantment with mass-produced food, several websites have sprung up offering organic and wholefood groceries to internet shoppers. The oldest and best-known of these is Abel and Cole (www.abel-cole.co.uk), an organic grocer that has been in business, though not always online, since 1988. Another well-known online organic grocery is Riverford Organic Vegetables. This company is based in Devon but has partner schemes as far away as the Midlands (www.riverford.co.uk).

The main offering from these types of online stores is a vegetable box of some kind. These usually contain a week's fruit and vegetables and cost between £10 and £20 and most sites offer a choice of boxes. A site may also offer individual items for sale, such as free-range eggs, organic meat and fish, perhaps fair trade products and seasonal

delicacies. The aim is to offer a wide range of sustainably produced foods that should, if the sites are as good as they promise, taste better than mass-produced equivalents.

EXPENSIVE TASTES

Organic sites tend to be slightly more expensive than a traditional supermarket. There are one or two other drawbacks to this way of shopping. Many of these business are local, so they serve a relatively small area. Some may also offer limited choice. They may not, for example, allow you to specify exactly what goes into your box. Check how the store works before you place your order. For example, Able and Cole lists the contents of your box on its website in advance. Should you not like something on the list, it can be changed. If you are prepared to pay a little more, these schemes are a great way of getting fresh, tasty food delivered right to your door.

ONLINE SUPERMARKETS COMPARED

SUPERMARKET	ASDA	OCADO	SAINBURYS	TESCO
Ease of use	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
Service	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
Web address	www.asda.com	www.ocado.com	www.sainsburys-toyou.com	www.tesco.com
Delivery fee	£3.99 (free if you spend more than £50 on an Asda credit card)	£5 (free for orders over £75)	£5	£3.99-£5.99
Minimum spend	£25	£40	£25	None
Our grocery bill	£24.69	£28.21	£25.28	£24.63
Delivery times	10am-9pm, seven days a week	6am-11pm, seven days a week	10am-10pm, seven days a week	Mon-Fri 9am-11pm, Sat 9am-8pm, Sun 10am-4pm
Substitutions policy	No-quibble refund policy from driver or over the phone	No-quibble refund policy from driver or over the phone	No-quibble refund policy from driver or over the phone	No-quibble refund policy from driver or over the phone
Loyalty card	None	Vouchers offered to holders of John Lewis credit card	Member of Nectar card scheme	Tesco Clubcard
Extras	Multi-search function	Multi-search function, recipes	Website offers forums and recipes	Food, wine and healthy living clubs, price watch, recipes, deal of the day RSS feed
Site founded	1998	2000	1999	1999
Security	SSL, 128-bit Blowfish encryption	SSL, 128-bit Blowfish encryption	SSL	SSL
Coverage	60 per cent of UK population	50 per cent of UK population	80 per cent of UK population	97 per cent of UK population
Product range	20,000 product lines	10,000 product lines	50,000 product lines	40,000 product lines
Goods/services on offer	Groceries, newspapers and magazines, electrical goods, clothes, CDs and DVDs, soft furnishings, financial services, flowers, glasses and contact lenses, electrical goods, holidays, financial services	Groceries	Groceries, newspapers and magazines, electrical goods, clothes, CDs and DVDs, soft furnishings, financial services, electrical goods, financial services	Groceries, newspapers and magazines, electrical goods, clothes, CDs and DVDs, soft furnishings, financial services, flowers, glasses and contact lenses, electrical goods, financial services
Customer support	0845 300777	0845 399 1122	0845 301 2020	0845 722 5533
Customer support times	8am-10pm, seven days a week	Mon-Sat 8am-11pm, Sun 12pm-8pm	Mon-Fri 8am-10:30pm, Sat 8am-9pm, Sun 10am-6pm	Mon-Fri 8am-11pm, Sat 9am-8pm, Sun 10am-6pm

Verdict

Online supermarkets

We preferred ease of use to good looks in this round-up. We're willing to bet few people visit a supermarket website to feast their eyes on design quality. You want to get the whole thing over with as quickly as possible. Asda and Tesco score well on this front, Sainsbury's and Ocado less so.

To be fair, the difference between the most and least easy-to-use site in this test isn't huge. With a few small alterations, the Sainsbury's and Ocado sites could be made as friendly as the other two, without having to abandon their current templates. However, the number of links you have to click through at www.sainsburys.co.uk to start shopping needs to be cut drastically, preferably to one.

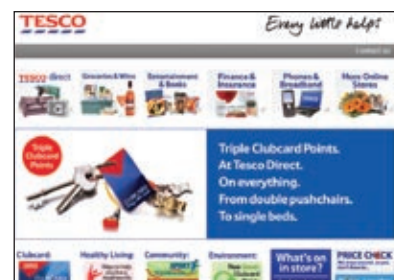
It was interesting to see the difference in the range of goods and services offered. We assumed most people would visit these sites to use the core grocery-shopping functions. The site that seemed to offer significantly less choice or fewer grocery products than the others was Ocado.

All the sites provide good customer service. No food or other items were broken or spoiled when delivered. The refund process was invariably good, no matter what the store, so you should have no problem rejecting an item you're not happy with and getting your money back.

We couldn't rate the sites on value for money as our test wasn't extensive enough for us to come to a definitive conclusion on the subject. But it was noticeable that Ocado was much more expensive. It used up our £25 budget about three products before the two best-value supermarkets, Asda and Tesco, and it required us to spend another £15 to get over the £40 minimum order threshold. With both Asda and Tesco, we were required to add an item just to make it up to £25.

Our highest rating goes to Tesco. The site is easy to use, we had no trouble getting a convenient delivery slot, the driver was helpful and the groceries were thoughtfully packed. The returns policy is also excellent; money is credited straight to a customer's account without delay.

No matter which site you buy from, online shopping is virtually hassle free and far less stressful than shopping in a store. You'd be well advised to stay at home and shop online rather than fight your way around your local supermarket. **CS**



▲ Tesco's homepage isn't a work of beauty, but it's functional and provides a good pictorial guide to all the goods and services